

The Brown Sisters

One bright summer morning in southern Ohio, sunlight creeping across her face woke thirteen-year-old Lucinda Wilson at about five-thirty o'clock. She sat bolt upright, and then made a leap out of bed as she thought, "The strawberries on the hill must be ready to pick." Lucinda had been watching with eager eyes a hill overgrown with wild strawberries. Now she joyously planned to surprise the family at breakfast with a basketful of the luscious, ripe berries.

She dressed rapidly but quietly so as not to disturb her sleeping sister. Lucinda had had the big bed to herself that night, as seventeen-year-old Mary was spending a few days with a chum on a nearby farm, and Ruth, the fifteen-year-old, slept on a narrow cot under the eaves at one end of the big upstairs room.

The Wilson house stood some distance back from the main road, with a long, straight drive from the gate to the front door. The drive seemed much too long to the girls on foot talking it, so Lucinda took a short-cut to the strawberry hill which lay along the highway, a path leading out of the barnyard, almost invisible in the tangle of growth. Lucinda hurried along the path to the road, and started up the hill. There were the berries, just as red and delicious as she had hoped. She began to pick rapidly, but the bottom of her basket was not even covered when a voice called to her from the highway below.

Startled, she looked down and saw two men on horseback. They were strangers to her, and her first glance put her on guard, for her home was a station on the Underground Railroad. These men, she felt certain, were slave-catchers.

The next instant Lucinda knew she was right. The man who had called to her, dark and scowling, now spoke again, "Have you seen two black girls go past here?" he asked. "Two girls about seventeen or eighteen years old? They're only a few minutes ahead of us, we're sure."

Lucinda shook her head. She answered them honestly that she had just come to the spot, and had seen nobody but themselves.

The men touched their horses and moved on. But Lucinda had no more thought of berries. The two girls would come to her home, she was sure, and the men would catch them at the very door, unless they were warned. She looked cautiously after the riders, to make certain neither was glancing behind; then she darted across the road and ran back along the path.

In a few moments, she was in the farmyard, and hurrying to the house. As she tore open the backdoor, she heard her mother's voice at the front. The Negro girls had come, and the men would be there the next instant. Breathless, she burst upon them. The door was still open, the girls and her mother standing in the hall.

"Shut the door! shut the door, quick!" she gasped. "They're coming after you!"

Even as she spoke she saw a horse turn into the driveway. Mrs. Wilson slammed the door, locked it, and looked wildly around for a hiding-place for the two trembling colored girls.

"Oh, dey'll drag us back again. We'll nebber be free, nebber!" cried one of them.

"Hush!" said Mrs. Wilson. "Go upstairs. Quick!" They rushed up the stairs; and into the room where Ruth was now up and half-dressed. She looked up, startled, as the four burst in.

"Lucinda," her mother directed, "put on thy nightcap and night-gown again, and get into bed."

She seized Mary's night-clothes from under the pillow, and thrust them upon one of, the colored girls. "Put these on, and' get into bed with my daughter. Lie next the wall, and turn thy head away from the door. Pull the cap well down over thy face."

As the, girl hastened to obey, Mrs. Wilson lifted the top of a large square wicker clothes-hamper which stood at the side of the room. Fortunately, it was nearly empty.

"Get in there," she said to the other girl, who stepped in, and crouched down for the lid to be replaced.

A loud knock sounded at the front. door. "Sit on the basket, Ruth, and catch thy dressing-gown around thee. The. slave-catchers will be up here in a moment."

Mrs. Wilson glanced around the room. There was nothing in sight to show that the colored girls had been there, and she hastened down 'the stairs to open the door.

"Good morning, ma'am," said one of the men. "We're after those two nigger girls that you have here."

"Indeed," she answered, "and how does thee know that we have two Negro girls here?"

"Because we were right on their heels, and we know they wouldn't have gone past here. So you'll have to let us search the house."

"You are welcome to do so, if you wish. But I can assure you that it will be wasted labor. You will find no Negroes here."

"We'll see about that," answered the man, as the two began a thorough search of each room in the house. Mrs. Wilson let them open the doors, and look as they would, until they came to the girls' room. Then she stepped forward.

"My three daughters sleep there," she said, "and it is yet early morning. Gentlemen, I beg you not to enter their room."

"Just as likely to be here as anywhere," said one of the men, and he opened the door and went in. There were the three girls, two in bed, with the bedclothes pulled up to their ears; the other sitting upon the wicker hamper, holding her wrapper about her, as though taken by surprise. In the hamper under her, however, the terrified colored girl was trembling so that it seemed to Ruth the men must see the hamper shaking. She sat as heavily as she could, and covered the hamper with her wrapper' as far as possible.

Somewhat embarrassed, the men looked hastily about the room, opened the closet-door, and finding nothing, went out again, with a half-hearted apology.

"Well," said one of them, as they came from the last room, "it begins to look as though those girls went past here, after all. We'd better put on speed, and perhaps we can overtake them yet."

"I told you that you would find no colored girls here," said Mrs. Wilson, quietly. She then hospitably offered them breakfast, but they refused in their haste. They galloped off and the girls were free to come from their hiding-places.

"De Lord bress you, missy," said the girl who had been Lucinda's bedfellow during, those tense moments. "You saved us, shuah."

"I'm glad I decided to pick strawberries for breakfast," said Lucinda. "And it's still early enough for me to go back and fill my basket. We'll have some for breakfast, after all."

The two colored girls stayed quietly in the house all day. Late that night a covered wagon took them to another Quaker home on another road. From there they were sent on next day with little danger, for word had come back that the two slave-catchers had lost all trace of them and declared that they had burrowed underground.